GROWING NATIVE

Scientists and naturalists say locally grown plants fight non-native species and restore the eco-system.
Harry Chase of Chase Farms in Portsmouth has a sophisticated system for propagating perennials. Plants along the right side of the greenhouse are all Native Rhody. Harry is assisted by intern Kelly Ainsworth, who is also a master gardener at URI, and beekeeper Jeff Mello.
A growing movement in favor of native plants

By TOM MEADE
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Garden centers, landscape designers, scientists and naturalists are urging Rhode Island homeowners and gardeners to go native this spring.

Rhody Native, a program to propagate and promote native plants is similar to the Rhody Fresh milk program, Rhody Raised Livestock meat initiative and the Rhode Island Sheep Cooperative's wool program. They all encourage Rhode Islanders to buy local.

Rhody Native also aims to help restore the state's eco-system, threatened by invasive alien plants.

Hope Leeson, a botanist with the Rhode Island Natural History survey, initiated Rhody Native, according to URI Prof. Sue Gordon.

In 2010, Leeson led a corps of volunteers who gathered more than 31,000 seeds and cuttings.

"Because they're outside of their own eco-system, they don't have any predators or other controls, so the aliens are very happy here," said landscape architect Catherine Weaver of Tupelo Garden Works in Wakefield. "They become thugs, and they take over a habitat niche."

"Native plants can restore balance," said nurseryman Harry Chase.

"Our native oaks, for example, can support hundreds of caterpillars and birds," said Barbara Chaves of Chaves Gardens in Middletown. "When you introduce non-native [plant] species, some of them can feed insects and birds, but fewer of them."

"To be a Rhody Native, a plant is propagated locally from seeds or cuttings harvested sustainably from local plant populations," said Gordon. Careful attention is paid to correct species identification and harvesting strategies that maximize genetic diversity and do not

Above, a semi-automated assembly line where seedlings are transplanted from small containers to larger ones. Some hand-planting is still needed. Harry Chase calls this the "Plant Plant."
In 2010, Leeson led a corps of volunteers who gathered more than 31,000 seeds and cuttings from 45 species of trees, shrubs, and herbaceous perennial plants. The plant material went to three nurseries—Portsmouth Nursery and Chase Farms, both in Portsmouth, and Branch Farm in Wakefield—all members of the Rhode Island Nursery and Landscape Association (RINLA).

The growers would propagate the plants and sell them at wholesale to local garden centers.

Harry Chase of Chase Farms said the plants were selected by a group of botanists, biologists, and entomologists. The idea was to choose plants that provide nutrition or refuge to beneficial insects that feed songbirds and other animals.

Strategically placed native plants help prevent the spread of invasive alien plants such as autumn olive and Japanese knotweed that have overtaken parts of New England’s native landscape.

Above, a semi-automated assembly line where seedlings are transplanted from small containers to larger ones. Some hand-planting is still needed. Harry Chase calls this the “Plant Plant.”

Harry Chase, above, gets another basket of perennials ready. At left, a view of his young plants.

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deplete wild donor populations. They are acclimated and suitable for use in habitat restoration projects as well as landscape plantings.

It’s important for plants that are native to Rhode Island to be raised by Rhode Island growers, according to Gordon.

“Local adaptations can be crucial to a plant’s ability to cope with environmental stresses, including climate change,” she said. “Rhody Native plants will be on the same timing as the surrounding ecosystem, blooming during the proper life-cycle of their pollinators, producing berries in time for the species that depend on them for food, and retaining balance in the food web. They will grow well in our soil conditions and have the ability to synchronize with seasonal moisture and temperature patterns.”

Rhode Island’s climate is changing, said Shannon Brawley, executive director of the Rhode Island Nursery and Landscape Association. The association’s members are experiencing the changes in their daily work, she said.

Landscape architect Catherine Weaver said native plants adapt to change: “Nobody does it better than Mother Nature.”
Workshops to show you how

Learn to garden with Rhody Native plants during a series of five workshops at the Roger Williams Park Botanical Center, beginning Saturday, April 14. Karen Asher of the Rhode Island Wild Plant Society will lead the first workshop on gardening with wildflowers, April 14, from 10 to 11:30 a.m. The fee is $22.50.

Kate Venturini, from the University of Rhode Island Outreach Center, will lead a workshop on assessing a garden site for native plants, April 28, from 10 a.m. to noon. The fee is $30.

Hope Leeson, who created the Rhody Native program for the Rhode Island Natural History Survey, will discuss adding Rhody Natives to your garden, May 5, from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. The fee is $15.

Rosanne Sherry of the URI Outreach Center will discuss gardening for birds and other wildlife, May 19, from 9 to 10:30 a.m. The fee is $22.50.

Mary Blue, founder of Farmacy Herbs, will lead a workshop titled “Native, Beautiful, Medicinal,” about native plants with therapeutic properties, May 26, from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. The fee is $22.50.

For more information, contact outreach@uri.edu or call (401) 874-2900.

Why go native?

Why should we include native plants in our landscapes? The Rhode Island Wild Plant Society says:
- They provide food and habitat for our pollinators, birds, butterflies and other wildlife.
- They are hardy and low maintenance; frost and drought tolerant.
- They are easy to grow organically in an environmentally safe way.
- Most are perennial, so they are a good long-term investment.
- They reduce water consumption, saving time and money.
- They help restore soil health.
- They enhance our sense of place, connecting us with our unique region.
- They make our environment rich and more biologically diverse.
- They are beautiful!

Some local favorites

Barbara Chaves, of Chaves Gardens in Middletown, shares some of her favorite Rhody Native plants for 2012. Collected throughout Rhode Island, Chaves’ selections were propagated by Chase Farms in Portsmouth.

Joe Pye Weed, collected at Mint Brook in South Kingstown. For full sun and moist to wet soil, a tall perennial with purple flowers.

Groundsel tree, collected at Succotash Marsh in South Kingstown. For full sun and moist to dry soil, it is a tall shrub of coastal habitats.

Gray goldenrod, collected near the Pawcatuck River as it flows through Bradford. The drought tolerant perennial prefers full sun.

It sports green-gray foliage with yellow flowers.

Seaside goldenrod, collected at Succotash Marsh. For full sun, the salt tolerant perennial prefers moist to dry soil. It has yellow yellow flowers.

Grass leaved goldenrod, collected along the Pawcatuck River in Bradford. For full sun to partial shade and moist to dry soil, this perennial has white flowers.

Meadowsweet, collected along the Stillwater River in Lincoln. For full sun to partial shade and moist to dry soil, this is a low shrub with dainty white flowers.

Where to buy some

Many nurseries and garden centers sell plants that are native to Rhode Island. Here is a list of retailers that offer Rhody Native plants, collected in the wild and propagated by Rhode Island growers:

- Chaves Gardens in Middletown
- Clark Farms in Wakefield
- Confreda Gardens in Coventry
- Farmer’s Daughter in West Kingstown
- Good Earth Organic Garden Center in Cranston
- Wildwood Nursery and Garden Center in East Greenwich
- Blue Moon Farm Perennials in Wakefield
- Central Nurseries in Johnston